GOETHE on ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

Anyone who has paid any attention to the theory of poetry in general, and tragedy in particular, will remember a passage in Aristotle which has caused much trouble to interpreters without them being able to fully understand its meaning. In the closer description of the tragedy, the great man seems to demand of it that it should purify the mind of the spectator from the passions mentioned by depicting actions and events that arouse pity and fear. However, I believe that the best way to convey my thoughts and convictions about this passage is to translate it. "The tragedy is the imitation of an important and self-contained action, which has a certain length and is performed in graceful language, by separate characters, each of whom plays his own part, and not by a single individual; but after a course of pity and fear, with the balancing of such passions, concludes its story."

By the above translation I believe that I have now clarified the passage hitherto obscure, and add only the following: How could Aristotle, in his way of always pointing to the subject, while speaking quite properly of the construction of the tragedy, think of the effect, and what is more, of the remote effect which a tragedy might have on the spectator? Not at all! He says quite clearly and correctly: if it has gone through a course of compassionate and frightening means, it must conclude its work in the theater by balancing, by reconciling such passions. He understands catharsis to mean this exquisite rounding off, which is actually required of all drama, indeed of all poetic works.

In the tragedy it is accomplished by a kind of human sacrifice, it may be really performed or it may be solved by a surrogate under the influence of a favorable deity, as in the case of Abraham and Agamemnon; enough, a redemption, a solution is indispensable at the end, if the tragedy is to be

a perfect work of poetry. But this solution, brought about by a favorable desired outcome, is already approaching the middle genre, like the return of Alceste; whereas in the comedy, marriage usually occurs to untangle all embarrassments, which are actually the lesser of fear and hope, and which, even if it does not bring life to a close, nevertheless makes a significant and alarming passage in it. No one wants to die, everyone wants to marry, and therein lies the half-joking, half-serious difference between the tragedy and the comedy of realistic aesthetics.

Furthermore, we note that the Greeks used their trilogy for such a purpose: for there is probably no higher catharsis than the *Oedipus at Colonus*, where a half-guilty criminal, a man who, through a daemonic constitution, through a dark intensity of his existence, precisely with the greatness of his character, through perpetually hasty execution of deeds, runs into the hands of the eternally inscrutable, incomprehensibly consequential powers, plunges himself and his own into the deepest, most irreparable misery, and yet in the end is still exalted and elevated to the kinsman of the gods, as the blessing guardian spirit of a country worthy of its very own sacrificial offering.

This is also the basis of the great master's maxim that the hero of the tragedy must be portrayed as neither entirely guilty nor entirely guiltless. In the first case, the catharsis would be merely material, and the murdered villain, for example, would seem to have escaped only the most ordinary justice; in the second case, catharsis is not possible: for fate or the human agent would be burdened with the guilt of an all too grave injustice.

Incidentally, I do not like to be polemical on this occasion any more than on another; however, I have to mention how this passage has been interpreted so far. Aristotle had said in the *Politics* that music could be used for moral purposes in education, in that sacred melodies could

soothe the emotions first stirred up in orgies, and thus other passions could also be brought into balance. We do not deny that this is an analogous case, but it is not identical. The effects of music are more substantial, as Handel did in his Alexander's Feast, and as we can see at every ball, where a waltz played after a lively polonaise stirs all the youth to Bacchic madness.

But music, as little as any other art, is capable of having an effect on morality, and it is always wrong to demand such achievements from it. Philosophy and religion alone can do this; piety and duty must be aroused, and such awakenings will only be caused by the arts by chance. But what they can and do achieve is a softening of coarse morals, which soon degenerates into softness.

Whoever now proceeds on the path of a truly moral inner education will feel and confess that tragedies and tragic novels by no means pacify the spirit, but rather set the mind and what we call the heart in unrest and lead it towards a vague, indeterminate state; the young love this and are therefore passionately taken with such productions.

We return to our beginning and repeat: Aristotle speaks of the construction of tragedy in so far as the poet, setting it up as an object, thinks to bring forth something worthy, attractive, visible and audible.

If the poet has now fulfilled his duty in his place, tied a knot significantly and resolved it worthily, then the same will happen in the mind of the spectator; the entanglement will confuse him, the resolution will clear it up, but he will go home no better for it: he would rather, if he were ascetically attentive enough, be astonished at himself, that he finds himself as careless as he is obstinate, as violent as he is weak, as loving as he is unloving, back in his abode as he went out. And so we believe we have said everything that concerns this point, even if this subject could be made clearer by further elaboration.

18. Nachlese zu Aristoteles' Poetik, 1827 (WA 41/II, 247 ff.)

Published in *Kunst und Altertum*, 1827. Apart from its value as a contribution to the perennial problem, this essay is of

interest as an expression of Goethe's inclination to mitigate the full impact of tragedy. He regarded indeed as something less than art that which arouses violent feelings of any kind. Whatever Aristotle may have meant, it seems clear that tragedy is not concerned, as some have supposed, with the long term effects on its audience and, as far as its immediate effects are concerned, Goethe preferred to think of them as part of his dramatic plots.

1. *Abraham.* Cf. Genesis 22, 1 ff.

2. *Agamemnon.* He was required to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. At the last moment Artemis snatched her from the altar, substituting a stag for her, and carried her in a cloud to Tauris.

3. *Söhnung.* Older form for 'Versöhnung': reconciliation.

4. *realistische Ästhetik.* Emended; cf. WA 41/II, 555. As a second emendation 'aristotelische' has been suggested.

5. *Ödipus von Colonus.* Strictly speaking the Theban Plays of Sophocles—*King Oedipus*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*—do not constitute a trilogy; that is, they were not written as three plays to be presented in a group. At the same time it is true to say that the Theban Plays derive from one and the same legend and that they may be read the way Goethe read them, as the continuous saga of the royal house of Thebes.—The only genuine trilogy that survives is Aeschylus' Oresteian Trilogy consisting of *Agamemnon*, *The Choephori* and *The Eumenides*.

6. *unherstellbar.* Unusual for 'nicht wieder gut zu machen': irreparable.

7. *die Maxime des großen Meisters.* A reference to Aristotle, *Poetics*, XIII.

8. *in der Politik.* Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, VIII.

9. *Alexandersfest.* A reference to Händel's Oratorio, 1736.